

Music Encoding Project

Caste study report: *Syrinx (La Flûte de Pan)*, Claude Debussy, 1913: a digital edition documenting variant readings, editorial intervention, and historical contributions.

Brief Historical Introduction

Syrinx was composed in 1913 by Claude Debussy as incidental music for a dramatic poem titled *Psyche*, written by esteemed author Gabriel Mourey. Although the play never materialised and Debussy rarely composed for theatre, *Syrinx* has been established as a milestone within the solo flute repertoire. It holds a historically prominent position as the first solo composition for the modern Böhm flute, completed in 1847. Further testimony to *Syrinx*'s authority within the flute canon is the large number of analyses devoted to this piece; the scholarship and historical debates surrounding *Syrinx* offer valuable ground to compare various performing suggestions, analytic insights and editorial intelligence. The principal sources employed for this critical digital edition are the single existing autograph manuscript recovered in Brussels (dated 1913), the first posthumous printed edition (Jobert, 1927), as well as the two most downloaded modern editions from IMSLP, Yair, 2011 and Castellarin, 2012. Letters and testimonies from flute players who worked with the composer will also be referenced.

Scholarly Digital Edition

Within the realm of Digital Humanities, the critical editing of musical scores has not been given equal attention to textual criticism. Regardless, there are several comparisons that can be drawn between the two fields, like the study of documentary sources transmitting a written work, as handwritten manuscript or printed form. Since the infant stages of music scholarship, musicologists often observed the editorial practices of classical philologists as a way of morphing their own scientific methods¹. Digital publications and representations in literary criticism are

¹ Grier, James. *The Critical Editing of Music: History, Method, and Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996

employed towards analytical means and accommodating purposes for critical digital editions. In this way, a high level of interactivity enables experimentation with new formats of publication. A similar pathway for the digital representation of primary sources, editorial intervention and critical editing of music is highly desirable. However, a musical work does not manifest only as written form/notation; it requires performance. Therefore, understanding what Lydia Goehr refers to as the music 'work-concept'², as well as the cultural practices associated with it, is crucial to the development of digital scholarly editions of music. Even though the scholarship and research surrounding digital textual criticism offers a valuable paradigm for the field of digital musicology, further research needs to be done on detailed notation data and its digital representation.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the potential of MEI for digital representation and construction of a critical comparative edition of music. The core tasks of a scholarly edition of music can be the analysis of compositional aspects, the investigation, documentation and explanation of the work's transmission, as well as a comparison between editions. Contrary to traditional print publications, which are restricted to a single base source due to practical or economic factors, the digital format affords to include all pertinent sources. This digital edition can thus document multiple variant readings and provide all historically legitimate alternative versions of the text simultaneously³. In this way, MEI enables the critical edition to become less hierarchical and irreversible; by organizing data in a more accessible manner, MEI democratises decisions to performance while formalising interpretation. Furthermore, MEI allows the incorporation of extramusical information, thus allowing specific elements of the score to be considered in more contextual specificity. Through such affordances, MEI can capture the multiplicity and dynamism of music as a cultural phenomenon and encourages radical rethinking of what a musical score can be.

² Goehr, Lydia, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991. Print

³ Kepper, Johannes, Perry Roland and Daniel Röwenstrunk. "Musical Variants: Encoding, Analysis and Visualization." Presented at Balisage: The Markup Conference 2013, Montréal, Canada, August 6 - 9, 2013. In *Proceedings of Balisage: The Markup Conference 2013*. Balisage Series on Markup Technologies, vol. 10 (2013). <https://doi.org/10.4242/BalisageVol10.Kepper01>.

Metadata, Paratextual elements & Analysis

Paratextual elements are indications and signs that come against, beside and in addition to the text, which is in this case the score 'itself'; they are always in subordination to and devoted to the text.⁴ All paratextual elements are metadata: the author's name, publication statement, preface, the cover, even the title are pieces of data that surround the text and are already textual, but not yet 'the' text. After Louise Fleury passed away in 1927, the flautist to whom Debussy dedicated the piece, the publisher Jean Jobert obtained the manuscript from Fleury's wife. Jobert printed the work and published it under the title *Syrinx*. However, this is not the title with which Debussy named one of his few theatrical works; the intended title was *La flûte de Pan*. Jobert changed the title to avoid confusion with another, earlier Debussy composition under the same name. Therefore, not Debussy but Jobert named the work *Syrinx*⁵. Even with the best intentions at heart, this act is far from innocent. By changing the paratextual elements that envelope the text, the meaning of the text 'itself' is altered and its reading heavily influenced. Titles such as this, provide guidance towards the reader's or listener's approach to the score and music. Therefore, modifying the original title has a perceptive effect on the meaning of the prescribed notation, thus ultimately its performance and interpretation.

Another paratextual element of Debussy's composition that has been altered posthumously are the breath marks marked in the score. While the manuscript from which Jobert derived the first edition is sadly lost, a manuscript found in Brussels in the early nineties bears Debussy's signature and is dated November 1913. When compared to the first edition, the manuscript reveals some differences in breathing and dynamics. For his publication, Jobert consulted the eminent flautist Marcel Moyse, who had worked with Debussy himself. It is popular scholarly opinion that the original manuscript bared no bar lines; Moyse could have potentially added them in order not to frighten amateur performers who wanted to approach the piece. Furthermore, the Brussels manuscript scripts only three breath marks: at the end of bar 2 and in

⁴ Genette, Gérard, *Introduction to the Paratext* [translation of Marie Maclean], New Literary History, 22: pp 261-272, 1991

⁵ https://www.academia.edu/486162/The_Meaning_of_Paratextual_Elements_in_Debussys_Syrinx

the middle of bar 4 and 14⁶. The Jobert edition, on the other hand, has seventeen breath marks in total. Through a process of standardisation, the added breath marks became conventional, since most editions that followed used Jobert's version as base text. Flautist Trevor Wye suggest that Moyse refused for his name to be used in the edition, asserting that he had only clarified some discrepancies⁷. Therefore, it is possible that subsequent readers presumed the breath marks were intended by Debussy himself. Many years later, however, Moyse disclosed that various breaths (see bar 16 and 25, for example) were added by himself to accommodate his own personal difficulties with breathing, while Debussy disapproved them. In the notes to his own edition, Trevor Wye, who was a student of Moyse's, quotes his teacher:

"I remember Debussy asking me not to breathe here, but I couldn't do it... for me it's not possible."⁸

Thus, albeit a part of the performing praxis of most flautists who choose to approach *Syrinx*, these breath marks should be avoided. In addition, according to Moyse's recollection of events, Debussy was fond of the breaths at the end of bar 28 and 29. However, he disapproved the breath in the middle of bar 25. By avoiding this breath mark, the tension between the *animando* and the repeat of the opening motif is suspended through the sustaining of the B flat. A jSymbolic analysis of *Syrinx* using the features 'Most Common Pitch', 'Range' and 'Number of Common Pitches' reveals that indeed, the B flat is the most important tone within the fourteen-tone range. It seems that the composer intended the work to be performed as unbroken discourse with a more fluid, uninterrupted melodic movement.

A note on jSymbolic

I found jSymbolic difficult to work with extensively on this piece, as it works better with MIDI files rather than MEI. Certain data cannot be represented explicitly in MIDI, like slurs or breath marks. While MIDI files abound and offer plenty of data for music informatics, further research needs to be done to evaluate the reliability of this data in comparison to human-

⁶ http://www.gatm.it/analitica/numeri/volume2/n2/0en_2.htm

⁷ https://www.academia.edu/486162/The_Meaning_of_Paratextual_Elements_in_Debussys_Syrinx

⁸ Wye, Trevor, 1994, note esplicative a C. Debussy, *Syrinx* or *la Flûte de Pan*, Novello, London.

annotated ground truth⁹. Thus, developing stronger methodologies to derive data located in MIDI files will aid the creation of MIDI-derived ground truth for audio content-based MIR¹⁰.

Conclusion

MEI provides valuable intuitive tools that allow for the exploration and communication of various relations among sources of notated data. In addition, it enables detailed insight into the transmission and transformation of musical works. In this way, MEI can contribute to the growing musicological literature concerning questions of truth, authenticity and authority; are we entering a discussion about the genuine intentions of the author? About plausible interpretations? About the necessary quest for origins? While the search for reliable historical sources and inquiry into detailed data should never be exempt, the questions that arise while encoding a digital edition of Debussy's *Syrinx* are nested in the heart of Western thinking.

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⁹ see Raffel, Colin A. and Daniel P. W. Ellis, *Extracting Ground-Truth Information from MIDI Files: A MIDIfesto*, ISMIR 2016.

¹⁰ Ibid.

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